

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Is Poland an Anti-Semitic Country?

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11.1. Introduction

To begin with, there are contradictory views on the issue of anti-Semitism: one of the major views perceives Poles as those who saved Jews and put their lives at risk (Bartoszewski 1967) but there are also opinions that Poles collaborated with Germans in the extermination (Gross 2008). This debate is very much alive even now years after the tragic events (Błoński 2008).

In order to understand the nature of Polish prejudices against Jews, it is vital to stress the two different meanings of the term “anti-Semitism in Poland”; first, how people from abroad define Polish anti-Semitism and second, what Poles think of themselves in relation to anti-Semitism.

People from Western countries often display biased knowledge on the situation of Poles in the occupied Poland and the Second World War history. They rely on the information from the media which is often misleading, if not harmful for Poland (e.g. writing about “Polish concentration camps”). That is why many people perceive Poland as a place where extermination of Jews took place. Moreover, many people in the West think that Poles often helped Germans with exterminating Jews. Common is the belief that the Polish during the Second World War did not suffer much. Another instance of promoting the myth of Poles helping Germans in the Holocaust is the film *Shtetl* shown on Public Television in the United States. As Pogonowski (1996) points out: “Israeli students in the film are shown making a series of claims, sometimes gleefully, about alleged Polish involvement in the Holocaust, including attempts to shift the blame for Nazi crimes from German people to Polish people. The students even mocked Polish rescue efforts, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the Germans punished Polish gentiles collectively for providing any form of assistance to Jewish people, or even for not turning them in.”

Another example of a biased attitude is an exhibit in the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., that presents violent events that occurred in Kielce, Poland in 1946 as a “Polish pogrom,” part of the Holocaust. Historians have diverse theories on the Kielce pogrom.¹ Most of them think it was a Soviet provocation to discredit

¹ “The Kielce pogrom was an outbreak of violence against the Jewish community in the city of Kielce, Poland on July 4, 1946, perpetrated by a mob of local townsfolk and members of the official government forces of the People’s Republic of Poland. Following a false tale of child kidnapping, including allegations of blood libel which led to a police investigation, violence broke out which resulted in the killing of around 40 Jews. Polish courts later tried and condemned nine people to death in connection with the incident.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kielce_pogrom [cited: 3 April 2010]).

Poles in the eyes of the world, or to focus the world's attention on that incident in order to divert the public attention from the Katyn massacre² at the time of the Nuremberg Trials.³

On the other hand, Poles who describe the Polish nation as anti-Semitic, understand the term in a different way – they resent the fact that some people think that “Jews rule the world,” “Jews are wealthy because they are bankers” or “Jews are greedy” and strongly object to anti-Semitic drawings which can be seen on the walls in Polish towns. For those Poles anti-Semitism is equated with negative attitudes towards Jews often caused by jealousy, xenophobia or fear.

11.2. Historical Background of Polish Anti-Semitism

Not many people know that in the 14th century Poland was one of the most tolerant countries in Europe. King Casimir the Great welcomed Jews who experienced intolerance in Western European countries and pronounced them “people of the king.” That was the time of major migration of Jews to Poland.

Before the Second World War Poland and the whole Europe was in a bad shape – damaged by the First World War. Many people all around Europe were suffering from poverty as well as malnutrition and the political situation was not stable. These factors stimulated the hatred towards the wealthy ones, in particular Jews. It is true that there was a group of people in the Polish society who described Jews as the ones who “have it easier through connections” and, as a result, they boycotted Jewish shops. The Catholic Church, which did not have a positive attitude towards Jews, also played a significant role in forming people's negative opinions on Jews.

During the Second World War Poland was devastated, a great part of the population was killed during the war. Others were prosecuted and intimidated. As for the Polish Jews, they were being exterminated by the Nazis. Some authors (Gross 2008; Engelking 2011; Grabowski 2011) claim that many Poles collaborated with the Nazis. According to Bartoszewski (1967), despite the threats of burning down whole villages and killing those who helped Jews, many Poles were hiding Jews.

² “The Katyn massacre was a mass execution of Polish nationals carried out by the Soviet secret police NKVD in April–May 1940. It was based on Lavrentiy Beria's proposal to execute all members of the Polish Officer Corps, dated 5 March 1940. This official document was then approved and signed by the Soviet Politburo, including its leader, Joseph Stalin. The number of victims is estimated at about 22,000, the most commonly cited number being 21,768. The victims were murdered in the Katyn Forest in Russia, the Kalinin and Kharkov prisons and elsewhere. About 8,000 were officers taken prisoner during the 1939 Soviet invasion of Poland, the rest being Polish doctors, professors, lawmakers, police officers, and other public servants.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Katyn_massacre [cited: 3 April 2010]).

³ “The Nuremberg Trials were a series of military tribunals, held by the main victorious Allied forces of Second World War, most notable for the prosecution of prominent members of the political, military, and economic leadership of the defeated Nazi Germany.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nuremberg_trial [cited: 3 April 2010]).

Poles were also throwing or hiding packs with food near the concentration camp walls to give some food to those who suffered in them. It is worth stressing that Poland was the only country where the capital punishment was introduced for hiding Jews, and still many people helped them. This fact has been appreciated by Israel after the war since Poland is the country with the biggest number of medals Chasid Umot ha-Olam ("Righteous among the Nations"), which is the highest award for non-Jews in Israel.

According to Bartoszewski (1967), cases of Poles denouncing Jews constituted only a margin of the society. Moreover, the Polish underground did not approve of such incidents. The Home Army punished with death those Poles who denounced Jews. Even the members of the extreme wings of the National Democracy movement (who were often anti-Semitic) curbed their resentments towards Jews during the war when Jews became the victims of the Nazis' brutal policy. According to Bartoszewski (2009), Poles never shared Nazis' views on extermination.

More than 20 years after the Second World War, due to the anti-Semitic propaganda, communists forced thousands of remaining Jews to leave Poland in 1968. Probably it was the Soviets who spurred anti-Semitic attitude and propaganda. Communists actively supported these decisions. In general, Poles remember those times with sadness because they lost their friends and colleagues in 1968.

11.3. The Present Situation

With passing years, the attitudes towards Jews improve – especially young people do not seem to feel any aversion towards Jews. Some elderly people seem to be more anti-Semitic and have prejudices against Jews. However, this is not a rule; anti-Semitic voices among young people sometimes can be heard and a great number of elderly people are not anti-Semitic.

The anti-Semitic drawings on the walls are not a good way of assessing the whole society. In fact, the groups of people who write anti-Semitic phrases are very narrow. In every society there are people who have extreme views.

Nowadays, Poles seem to display an increasing appreciation towards the Jewish aspects of their culture. Recently, "Tęsknię za Tobą, Żydzie" ["I miss you, Jew"] action has been launched, in which Rafał Betlejewski gathered a group of Poles around an empty chair at Dworzec Gdański (the place from which Jews in 1968 left Poland) in order to talk about the Jews Poles miss ("Tęsknię za Tobą, Żydzie"). This action led to organizing meetings all around Poland in the places where Jews used to live. Moreover, Jewish festivals, Jewish culture as well as Jewish music have become an important part of the contemporary Polish culture.

To sum up, there are prejudices in Poland against Jews but there is also a growing interest in Jewish culture and history. CBOS (2011) [Public Opinion Research Centre] research presents a slowly growing sympathy and declining reluctance of Polish people towards Jews (Appendix). Many Polish Jews do not

hide their identity, which proves that they do not feel insecure in Poland and they are accepted and tolerated as a minority. The problem of Polish anti-Semitism is that Poles perceive it differently than some other nations. Polish people are unaware that by describing themselves as being anti-Semitic, they might unintentionally accept the blame for helping Germans in the extermination at the time of the Second World War.

QUESTIONS AND TASKS

1. Are there similar prejudices and stereotypes in your country?
2. How do minorities in your country cope with prejudices and stereotypes?
3. Did your perception of tolerance and prejudices in Poland change after reading this Chapter?
4. What, do you think, can be done to eradicate negative attitudes towards any minorities?
5. Have you been the subject/victim of prejudice behaviour? If so, what happened?
6. Do you think prejudice starts in the home?
7. Ask three friends/students how they feel about minorities in your country or about the people of any other country. Do any of their opinions reflect a stereotype?

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APPENDIX

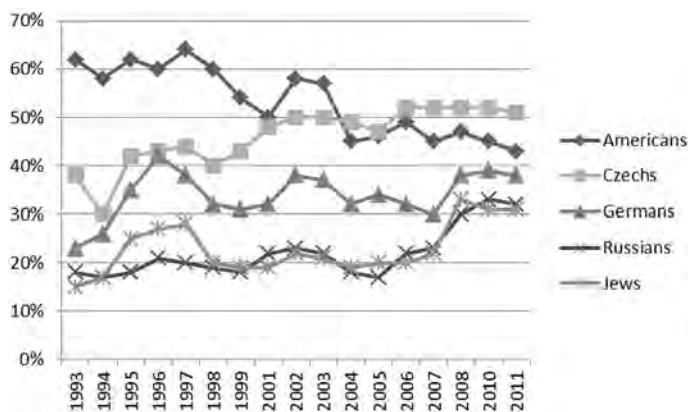


Figure 1. Changes of sympathy towards the chosen nations, source: Wądołowska (2011).

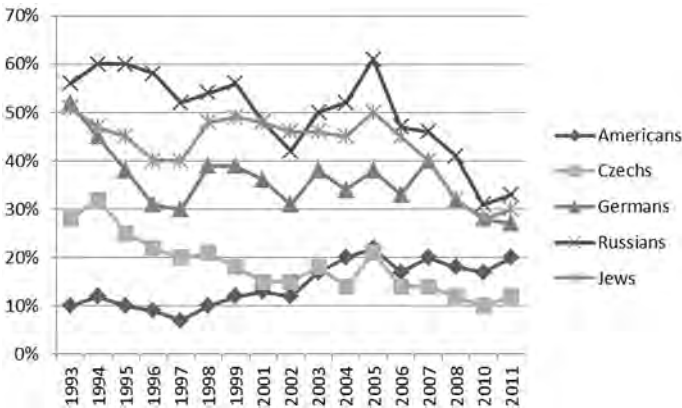


Figure 2. Changes of aversion towards the chosen nations, source: Wądołowska (2011).